

Congregational (now First Unitarian) Church
Union and Eighth Streets (northwest corner)
New Bedford
Bristol County
Massachusetts

HABS No. MASS-681

HABS
MASS,
3-NEBED,
15-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

CONGREGATIONAL (NOW FIRST UNITARIAN) CHURCH

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15-

Address: Union and Eighth Streets (northwest corner),
New Bedford, Bristol County, Massachusetts.

Present Owner
and Occupant: First Unitarian Church, New Bedford, Massachusetts,
Eighth Street at Union Street.

Present Use: Church.

Brief Statement
of Significance: A substantial church, built in the 1830's for one
of the important congregations in New Bedford from
the design of Alexander Jackson Davis.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Individuals of the First Congregational Society in New Bedford, "who then sold the pews to indemnify themselves, and deeded the property to the society for a nominal consideration." The building is still owned by the same society, which later changed its name to the First Unitarian Society. [Ellis, p. 543].
2. Date of erection: 1836-1838 [Ibid.].
3. Architect, builders: "A. J. Davis, of New York, Russell Warren, of Providence, Rhode Island, and Seth H. Ingalls, architects. Hon. James Howland, Gideon Allen, Hon. Joseph Grinnell, J. B. Congdon, George T. Baker, Zachariah Hillman and others, building committee. Seth H. and William Ingalls, contractors and builders." [Ricketson, pp. 183-184].
4. Notes on alterations and additions: The original building was nearly square, with an entry through a central tower on the front [a lithograph drawn shortly after the church was built--see below]. A chapel was added to the north end, on Eighth Street, at an undetermined date. Later, apparently in the twentieth century, this was replaced by a much larger parish house. Around the turn of the century the chancel was remodeled and a large Tiffany mosaic installed. The column capitals of the interior were modified, and an ornamental band carried around the wall at the height of the capitals. Apparently at this time a new pulpit and chancel rail were added, and vestibule woodwork remodeled. [from old photographs and observation].

5. Important old views: A lithograph of the 1840's, showing the original building exterior, east and south sides.

Several undated photographs of the interior, before alterations described above.

The above views are in the possession of the church, and displayed on the walls of the parish house.

Two undated stereo pairs, S. F. Adams, photographer, New Bedford, Massachusetts, apparently taken about the 1880's. "View from Court House Southeast" shows the top part of the church, and a small gable-roofed building with bracketed cornice, west of the church at the north end. The other shows the south and east sides of the church, with the chapel at the north end.

An undated, unattributed, stereo pair--a view on Eighth Street looking south--shows the chapel quite well.

The stereopairs are in the collection of the New Bedford Free Public Library.

6. Sources of information: Leonard Bolles Ellis, History of New Bedford and its Vicinity, 1602-1892 (Syracuse: D. Mason & Company, 1892). This is considered one of the definitive histories of New Bedford--a general history, with a biographical section; it is well indexed.

Daniel Ricketson, New Bedford of the Past (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903). This is a book of reminiscences; Ricketson gives Seth H. Ingalls credit for the information cited here.

- B. Supplemental Material: Ellis Op. cit., p. 543⁷ gives the names of the building committee as follows: Stephen Merrihew (Chairman), George T. Baker, William P. Russell, Charles W. Morgan, William H. Taylor, James Howland 2nd, William H. Allen, Gideon Allen, William W. Swain, David R. Greene, and James B. Congdon.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: An imposing, austere, granite church, having a three-aisled "Gothic hall-plan" interior with plaster vaults. Designed by A. J. Davis, it still retains much of its original character.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: About 90' x 120', including tower. One story, facing south.
2. Foundations: Granite--a continuation of the wall construction.
3. Wall construction: Rough faced granite, courses two feet high, pieces from two to seven feet long (some even longer). Wide mortar joints--about 3/4". The material is said to have come from a local quarry.
4. Towers: There is a large square central tower, with belfry, at the south front; there are four smaller square towers, one at each corner of the original structure. All have diagonal buttresses at the corners, and are terminated by battlements at the top, without spires. At the upper corners of the main tower are turrets set diagonally, with battlements.
5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: There are three doorways on the south front--one in the central tower and one in the wall at either side of the tower. The main central doorway has a pointed arch, chamfered, with a simple label moulding over the arch. The tympanum is filled with wood paneling. There are two doors, each with four panels, hung on very heavy butts. There are granite steps.

Each side doorway is a rectangular opening, with a Tudor-arched wood frame set in the masonry. There is a single two-panel door in each.

- b. Windows: Main windows on the east and west walls are high, with pointed arches. Openings have wooden tracery, with a single mullion and one transom bar. They are filled with colored leaded glass. Masonry arches have a heavy moulding, terminating at the spring line in a rough corbel.

Over the main entrance is a small window, with lintel and label moulding, with wood tracery. Over each side entrance is a small window, and above that a small window in form of a Latin cross (imitation of cross-bow slits).

6. Roof: The shape is gabled, with the ridge extending north and south; the pitch is fairly low. The surface is now covered with asphalt composition shingles. Towers are roofed with copper. There is a scuttle to the roof

of the main tower, but there are no domes nor spires. A battlemented parapet surrounds the roof and towers.

7. Roof and ceiling construction: Four main trusses of sawn timbers span from the outside walls, without any apparent support from the interior columns. At first glance they resemble a scissors truss in form, but the lower members do not carry through as in a scissors truss. There is a king post, and a queen post at each side, with a strut between.

Principal rafters are 11 1/2" x 11 1/2", notched into the top of the 12" x 13" king post, tied across with a bent wrought iron strap, on each side, 5/8" x 3" in section, with two 1" bolts in each principal rafter. The king post is notched to receive a 3" x 5 1/2" ridge pole. The principal rafters carry three purlins approximately 8" x 8", on each side. The strut between the king post and the queen post is 7" x 7", and the lower members of the truss are approximately 12" x 12" in section. They are tied across at the center with iron straps and bolts. These lower members are not horizontal, but incline upward to the center of the truss.

Joints generally are morticed and pegged; many are reinforced with iron stirrups or straps, and bolts. In my opinion this iron work is original.

The roof surface is sheathed with wide matched boards, from 10" to 20" wide. Rafters are 3" x 5 1/2", 24" on centers.

The plaster vaults are hung from the trusses in the following manner: timbers are supported on the lower members of the truss, and from them boards of varying sizes are suspended. To them are secured wide boards whose lower edges are cut to the curve of the vault surface. Across these boards are nailed 1" x 4" furring strips; wood lath are nailed to the furring strips.

The vault of the chancel is constructed in a similar manner, but with expanded metal lathing--obviously modern.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plan: The auditorium is rectangular, approximately 79' wide by 72' long, divided into three four-bay aisles of equal height, the center aisle being approximately 46' wide. At the north end is a modern chancel, approximately 32' wide by 12' deep. At the south is a vestibule

in the main tower, with a narrow narthex on either side. Over the south end of the auditorium is an organ gallery, reached from winding stairways in the front corner towers. Adjoining the north end of the church is a modern parish house. Under the auditorium is a basement, completely modernized.

2. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster, painted. The ceiling of the auditorium is in the form of quadripartite ribbed Gothic vaulting; in the center is a large grille, installed in recent years for air conditioning purposes. A quadripartite plaster vault over the vestibule has ornamental plaster foliage in panels at the groins.
3. Doors: A small door in the southeast tower appears to be original, modified with some glazing in the upper part. It has a box lock.
4. Trim: The columns are cased with wood; each is round, with four colonnettes attached. The capitals were formerly simpler.

The parapet of the organ gallery appears original; it is paneled with a battlement motif, and painted imitation of wood graining. Higher and lower panels alternate, in the form of niches and quatrefoils, respectively.

The vestibule is wainscoted, with panels; the auditorium is not. A wooden base, of the same profile as the column bases, extends around the auditorium.

There is one row of pews in each side aisle, and a double row on each side of the main aisle. Pew ends appear old, and may be original; they are paneled, with painted imitation wood graining, and have a mahogany handrail at the top. Doors and paneling generally resemble the parapet of the organ gallery.

5. Lighting: Modern electric fixtures--no indication of original lighting fixtures.
6. Heating: Modern heating and air conditioning systems. Ducts now occupy a large part of the attic space. There is no visible indications of the original heating system, if any.
7. Miscellaneous: The corner towers are carried on walls, except the inner corner of each, which is supported by a brick pier visible from the attic. In the course of alterations to the building, the inner corner of the northeast tower was supported on a steel beam laid diagonally across the corner, bearing on side and end walls.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: The church occupies the eastern portion of a rather wide lot, with a great deal of space between it and County Street, which bounds the site on the west. At the east is Eighth Street, and on the south is Union Street, toward which the building faces. The ground rises toward the west.
2. Enclosures: A fine cast iron fence, shown on an early lithograph of the building, still remains at the south-east corner of the site, with a double gateway on axis with the main entrance. Granite posts, set diagonally, resemble the turrets of the main church tower, with battlemented caps. The fence rests on a granite base, which is stepped to follow the sloping ground along Union Street. The fence is about six feet high, with round vertical bars topped by fleurs-de-lys, and a frieze of quatrefoils.
3. Landscaping: There is a hedge along County Street, and a large part of Union Street, and informal plantings. A wide flagstone walk leads from the entrance gate to the central entrance door, with narrow branches to the smaller doors on either side. The original bell, now cracked, is placed at the front of the building as a feature of the setting; it was replaced by a modern bell.

Prepared by Harley J. McKee, Architect
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